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ABSTRACT

Several diverse philosophical schools of thought might well provide guidance for the teaching of reading. But which philosophies of education should be studied in depth and applied in teaching students, if perceived as providing for optimal learner progress? This paper first addresses the advantages and disadvantages of statewide testing and state mandated standards. The paper then discusses the following: realism as a philosophy in teaching reading; idealism/perennialism as a philosophy of reading instruction; the philosophy of individualized reading; and eclectic philosophy of reading instruction. It concludes that the reading teacher needs to: keep abreast and updated in matters pertaining to philosophy, trends, and issues in education; provide for the individual needs, interests, and purposes of the student in reading; and diagnose and remedy deficiencies in student reading. (Contains 10 references.) (NKA)

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Philosophy of Teaching Reading.

by Marlow Ediger

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PHILOSOPHY OF TEACHING READING

There are diverse philosophical schools of thought which might well provide guidance for the teacher in the teaching of reading. Each school of thought is unique in what it has to offer in the curriculum. Teaching and learning situations vary and how educators perceive what and how reading should be taught is subject to interpretation and different philosophies of instruction. The act of teaching then may be viewed from different perspectives and philosophical schools of thought. Which philosophies of education should then be studied in depth and then applied by the teacher in teaching students, if perceived as providing for optimal learner progress?

State Mandated Standards and Testing

Forty nine out of fifty states in the union have state mandated standards or objectives for student attainment. These standards may be quite difficult for students to achieve. States have become quite "ambitious" in boasting of very high standards which few students can achieve or realize. Pertaining to the state of Arizona's statewide testing program, Bowman (September 5, 2002) wrote the following:

Only 12 % of the 10th graders taking the exam in spring 1999 passed the math section, prompting parents and teachers to complain that the state's schedule for phasing in high stakes testing was too aggressive.

These dismal results in mathematics prompted education officials to make new rules that require high school students to take two consecutive years of math -- algebra in 9th grade and geometry in 10th grade -- and revamp the math portion of the AIMS (Arizona Instrument to Measure Standard)) to match the curricular changes. The state board also agreed to move back the graduation requirements in that subject from 2002 to 2004.

The standards for implementing the AIMS high stakes testing has been postponed four times. Had AIMS been implemented 90% of last year's students would not have received a high school diploma. "The changes were necessary, in part, because the state would likely face lawsuits without them," according to the state superintendent of schools Jaime Molera. Similar results have been reported in terms of student failure to pass the reading part of the state mandated test. Reading is the major test component that needs to be passed, in

most states, in order that a student would receive a high school diploma. State test results are receiving priority in determining how well a student is doing in school achievement. A single test and test score then would signal if a student will receive a high school diploma or not. Disadvantages of statewide testing are the following:

1. a single percentile from a test is not adequate to ascertain how well a student is achieving. Daily school work accomplishments of students are then completely ignored.
2. many statewide tests have not been pilot tested to take out weaknesses prior to being administered it to students.
3. state mandated tests are written by human beings and cannot be that accurate an indicator of student progress to be used in exit tests. Not receiving a high school diploma can be disastrous to students. Certainly, there are other procedures of evaluation to be used in student promotion consideration such as port folio development.
4. a test can be written in which all fail or written so that all students pass the test. The complexity of test items and subject matter contained therein may be written at a very elementary or a very complex level. This is quite obvious in the results of the AIMS state mandated test taken by students.
5. no test can be that reliable and valid to foretell a student's entire future when withholding a high school diploma (Ediger, 2000, Chapter Twelve).
6. state mandated tests lack data on the validity and reliability of their tests.
7. states have become overly ambitious in setting very high standards for student achievement.
8. objectives and goals relating directly to these state mandated standards must be in the hands of all teachers to use in teaching students. Why? Teachers need to have highly specific guidelines as to what should be taught and what will be covered in the test so that increased student validity can be in evidence.
9. the levels of acceptable achievement for students set by different states can be quite arbitrary. No educator can know where individuals should truly be in academic achievement since any set level will emphasize human endeavor, purpose, and intent.
10. students should attain as optimally as possible, but not face failure in learnings and accomplishments (Ediger, 2001, p. 5).

Statewide testing has its advantages including the following:

1. it does provide a gauge to ascertain student reading achievement.
2. it can provide diagnostic and remediation information in assisting teachers to provide quality learning opportunities for students.
3. it can be used, along with other evaluation approaches such as portfolios, to provide information on how well students are achieving.
4. it can be a source of information for states to use in recommending an improved reading curriculum.
5. it can provide a source of relevant objectives for teacher use in teaching students (Ediger, 1977, 49- 50).

Realism as a Philosophy in Teaching Reading

Realists tend to believe one can know the real world as it truly is in and of itself. Thus, it is possible to receive a duplicate of reality, not ideas merely of what the the world consists of. Realists then emphasize objectivity in knowing reality, not subjectivity. The behaviorally stated objectives movement comes close to stressing certainty in deciding upon what students should know and be able to do. Specificity in selecting objectives is necessary so that it can be measured to determine what a student has achieved in reading as well as in other curriculum areas. A numerical result from testing students indicates how well a learner is doing academically. The numeral may consist of a percentile, standard deviation, stanine, and/or grade equivalent. Either a student has/has not achieved an objective as a result of instruction in the classroom. The following are examples of highly specific objectives, as emphasized by realism as a philosophy of education:

1. the student will associate correct phonemes with the correct graphemes for each of the following letters in contextual reading: l, m, n, p, and r.
2. given a reading selection, the student will identify two facts and two opinions.
3. the student will identify a problem, gather information in answer to the problem, develop an hypothesis, test the hypothesis, and revise it, if necessary, in an ongoing reading experience.

As it can be noticed above, realists like precision,

numerals, and exactness in deciding upon what students should learn and in ascertaining how much they have learned. The testing and measurement movement follows those criteria.

Realism as a philosophy of reading instruction has the following advantages:

1. it assists teachers in focusing clearly upon what students need to learn with its precise objectives of instruction.
2. it implies then which learning opportunities to provide students so that the chosen objectives may be achieved.
3. it indicates what will be covered in testing situations so that the objectives of instruction have been achieved by students. Tests then tend to be valid in that they need to relate directly to the objectives of instruction (Ediger, 1995, Chapter Seven).

Idealism/Perennialism as a Philosophy of Reading Instruction

Instead of an objective reality, idealists/perennialists focus upon an idea centered universe. Why? Individuals cannot know the real world as it exists, but they can know ideas pertaining thereto. The mind then provides ideas about what exists in reality. The Great Books of the Western World program of reading instruction tend to emphasize idealism/perennialism as a philosophy of instruction. Advocates of the Great Books believe in the classics as providing subject matter of worth in the reading curriculum. Recently written literature has not stood the test of time as having the worth/value as compared to the writings of Mark Twain, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Robert Louis Stevenson, and Washington Irving, among others. The author well remembers his interest and excitement in reading Twain's Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, Hawthorne's The Scarlet Letter, Stevenson's poem My Shadow, and Irving's The Legend of Sleepy Hollow. If writings stand the test of endurance, then they have the greater worth and value. Classical writings can be simplified for very young readers. In a philosophy class taken on the undergraduate level, the author did not fully understand the classic The Republic by Plato until he read a simplified version. The simplified version helped him to understand, structure, appreciate, and attach meaning to Plato's The Republic.

O' Neill (1981) wrote:

Accordingly, educational intellectualism tends to be past orientated and to emphasize stability ---- the continuity of the great, enduring ideas --- over change. In general, the eternal truths are best represented in the masterworks of the greatest minds as these ideas are conveyed through the cultural heritage

of mankind. The overall goal of of education is to identify, preserve, and transmit essential Truth (that is the central principles that govern the underlying meaning and significance of life). More significantly, the intermediate role of the school as particular social institution is to teach and the students how to think (that is, wisdom) of the past.

Mortimer Adler (1902-2000) was a leading advocate of the Great Books Program of reading instruction. Toward the end of his long, productive career as an educator, Adler advocated the teacher choosing a book of personal interest and on the readiness level of student reading for discussion. The dynamic teacher's role here is to capture the enthusiasm of students for reading and discussing literature. Students are to read for interest and excitement in learning and studying. The teacher needs to be a stimulating discussion leader who can capture student motivation for reading (The Junior Great Books Foundation, no date given, pp 1 and 2).

When students are engaged in discussing content from a library book, precise measurable results in comprehension are not emphasized. Rather, students are guided to participate fully in the discussion and interpret what has been read. An idea centered curriculum, emphasizing idealism as a philosophy of education, zeros in upon personal thought, not "objective" statements in literature.

Idealism/perennialism, as a philosophy of instruction, has a plethora of advantages in a quality reading curriculum including the following:

1. it stresses the importance of reading to achieve generalizations, not precise facts which are difficult to remember.
2. it makes for less reading failure in that interpretations of literature can vary from student to student. The student then is not appraised in terms of giving exact answers to questions, but rather in terms of being interested, enthused, and actively involved in an exciting discussion covering content in the selection read.
3. it emphasizes students reading classical literature as well as recent literature to capture learner attention and desire for reading (See Ediger, 1997, Chapter Three).

Philosophy of individualized Reading

Individualized reading stresses a philosophical procedure whereby the learner selects which sequential books to read. These choices are made from among a variety of genres and complexity levels of library books. Thus, the student makes

choices as to what to read based on personal interests, meanings, and purposes. After completing the reading of a library book, the student may have a conference with the teacher to assess reading achievement and progress. There are no absolute standards here for the student to achieve. Flexibility and open endedness are key concepts to emphasize in individualized reading. Time on task is important for students in that continuous progress in reading needs to be made. Individualized reading emphasizes the following salient philosophical points:

1. individual endeavors are continually in evidence in the reading curriculum, not collaborative work.
2. holism in reading content is emphasized, not segmenting the reading curriculum with systematic phonics woven into the comprehension of subject matter.
3. students individually are heavily involved in self evaluation within a conference setting with teacher leadership.
4. the student is the decision maker in selecting and sequencing his/her very own reading.
5. no precise, measurable standards are implemented for student attainment. Flexible standards are there in that the learner reveals levels of fluency in oral reading in the student/teacher conference. He/she also indicates degrees of vital comprehension abilities within the conference setting (See Ediger, 1975, 29- 35).

Eclectic Philosophy of Reading Instruction

Eclectic philosophy of teaching reading takes the best from all approaches in the instructional arena. Basal readers and their uses might illustrates the point. The sequential stories contained in a basal reader have been chosen by their authors. The accompanying Manual of the basal offers suggestions for teaching and learning situations. Teachers may then choose which of these to emphasize in teaching reading. They might also bring in their own thinking in how reading is to be taught. Few teachers religiously follow the Manual en toto. But, the Manual does offer suggestions for objectives, learning opportunities, and evaluation techniques to implement in the reading curriculum. Thus, the Manual may offer the following techniques/approaches to emphasize in reading instruction:

1. phonics learning activities. The teacher may then choose which of these to implement; he/she may also bring in those phonics learnings deemed necessary for a particular child.

2. syllabication activities. Based on learner needs, syllabication learnings may be stressed/ modified or omitted.

3. comprehension questions, contained in the Manual, to be asked of students may be chosen, from among alternatives. The Manual does not dictate what to emphasize in the instructional arena, but provides alternatives in teaching reading. The teacher is always in command to select, refuse, or modify.

4. teacher input into the reading curriculum can be very frequent depending upon the creative strengths of the instructor.

5. group or individual classroom teaching suggestions may be in evidence as the reading teacher perceives the chosen procedure to meet learner needs.

The teacher may then use the basal in a very open ended and flexible manner. The quality of the reading curriculum with basal reader use depends largely upon the creativity, skills, and knowledge of the teacher, as well as student attitudes brought to each lesson and unit of instruction (See Ediger, Fall, 1999).

In Conclusion

The reading teacher needs to

1. stay abreast and updated in matters pertaining to philosophy, trends, and issues in the instructional arena.
2. provide for the individual needs, interests, and purposes of the student in reading.
3. diagnose and remedy deficiencies in student reading.

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